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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 001215

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [VE](#)
SUBJECT: VENEZUELA MEDIA UPDATE: PROPOSED MEDIA LAW, OTHER
MEASURES FURTHER THREATEN FREE PRESS

REF: A. CARACAS 001078
[1](#)B. CARACAS 000752

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Classified By: ACTING POLITICAL COUNSELOR DANIEL LAWTON,
REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: The Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (BRV) continues to undermine independent media. A telecommunications bill is rumored to be in the works that will severely curtail free press in Venezuela, giving the executive branch the ability to control the flow of radio, TV, internet, and SMS information in cases of national security or national interest. The BRV also recently shut down two radio stations in Guarico State for operating without government licenses, demonstrating at a minimum, selective enforcement of the law. At the same time, pressure from the government has resulted in a number of media outlets ceasing the publishing of all editorials. Government-owned media, meanwhile, remain an appendage of Venezuelan President Chavez's political party, the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV). END SUMMARY.

MEDIA LAW IN THE WORKS?

[1](#)2. (C) Local independent press outlets have reported extensively on a new draft law affecting media in Venezuela, publishing excerpts from the yet-to-be introduced law. The law would reportedly allow Chavez, for reasons of, "public order, security, or the interests of the Nation, to suspend the transmission of communication." The draft law includes the "transmission, emission, or reception of signals, signs, writings, images, sounds, or information of any nature," in the modes of communication that could be shut down if deemed necessary by the Bolivarian Republic. Some BRV officials have denied the draft in circulation in the media will be the final wording of the law. Public Affairs Section contacts, however, have expressed the belief that the BRV has been heading in this direction for some time, and speculated that a new media law would be consistent with the BRV's efforts to restrict press freedom and a logical consequence of the BRV's conviction that the independent media is engaged in an anti-BRV campaign. On August 27, in a speech carried by all open-air television and radio signals, Chavez again denied the existence of the law and called the owners of large national newspapers, "pitiyanquis (yankee-sympathizers)," saying they would "go to their graves with bitterness."

[1](#)3. (C) Speculation is that the new law could also severely limit access to the internet by creating a single point of

access. The government recently nationalized the largest telecommunications company in Venezuela, CANTV, and the BRV's stated goal has been to keep "strategic" sectors under government control. Though a provision to create a single access point controlled by the government does not appear in draft versions of the law, local media and PAS contacts fear such a measure could easily be put in place and would be legal under the draft law.

RADIO STATIONS CLOSED

¶4. (C) The BRV closed radio stations 101.5 FM and 91.3 FM in Guarico State capital San Juan de los Morros for not having necessary broadcast licenses, and further action is to be taken against them by the country's National Communications Commission (CONATEL). While the two stations were in the process of having their licenses renewed, 200 Venezuelan soldiers shut down the stations. Both radio stations are indirectly owned by Guarico Governor Eduardo Manuitt. Manuitt's daughter Lenny Manuitt is an opposition candidate for the governorship of the state in elections in November and will be running against PSUV candidate Willian Lara, former BRV Information Minister. Chavez and Lara have accused Manuitt of corruption and using the state police as an intimidation force.

¶5. (C) The two radio stations appear to have lacked some necessary licenses, which is a fairly common situation for radio stations throughout the country. However, this case clearly appears to be one of selective enforcement of the law in order to shore up Lara's chances in the November elections. The stations did not run government-mandated ads supporting Lara. Further, Manuitt was an ally of Chavez

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until he decided to support his daughter for the state's governorship over Lara. Fatherland for All (PPT) is supporting Lenny Manuitt's candidacy.

NEWSPAPER SELF CENSORSHIP

¶6. (C) During the Ambassador's trip to the states of Anzoategui and Nueva Esparta (ref A), Maria Alejandra Marquez (protect), the President of El Tiempo, a large regional paper in Anzoategui, reported that the newspaper keeps editorializing to an absolute minimum due to heavy reliance on government advertising. Marquez said self-censorship is required in order to keep advertising revenue from the government and for regional papers to survive. Marquez also said her paper does not, and will not, endorse candidates for the regional elections in November. The practice of self-censorship has become the norm over the last ten years in nearly all media in Venezuela. Two prominent examples are Panorama, the most widely distributed daily in Western Venezuela, and Venevision, the ratings-leading open signal television channel owned by Gustavo Cisneros. Both were previously critical of Chavez, and have fallen in line in order to stay in business.

VTV BECOMES PSUV TV

¶7. (C) State-owned television station Venezolana de Television (VTV) has been harshly criticized by opposition elements for the channel's extensive coverage of PSUV candidates and their campaigns for election in November. Local press reports, citing media watchdogs, indicated that, between January and July 2008, the channel transmitted 1,800 free commercials worth 20,000,000 BsF. (USD 9,300,000). The outlet rarely covers opposition election campaigns. Opposition candidates have also criticized Chavez' weekly

television show, 'Alo, Presidente,' as a several-hour long commercial for the PSUV. The last two episodes of 'Alo Presidente' were held at PSUV rallies and campaign stops. As an open-signal network, VTV's viewership is estimated by Venevision's ratings records at 4.4 percent.

COMMENT

18. (C) The recent BRV moves, or threat of such moves, against press freedom will likely further inhibit the flow of news and access to information by Venezuelans as November elections draw near. The new law, if passed in its rumored current form, will give extensive power to the BRV to shut down media when they see fit. Other forms of intimidation, such as using uniformed soldiers to close down radio stations linked to opposition politicians have once again put the independent media on notice and sent an ominous signal at just the moment the nation prepares for a new round of elections.

DUDDY